



Texas Department *of* Motor Vehicles

HELPING TEXANS GO. HELPING TEXAS GROW.

Response to Request for Information Inquiry 3

Prepared for the
House Committee on Transportation

September 18, 2020

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Inquiry 3

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the ability of the transportation state agencies to accomplish their mission and to serve the public in an effective and efficient manner?

Summary

Although the requirements to obtain some services from the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV) have been waived during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – most notably certain title and registration services – the department has continued to serve Texans.

Availability of services has been affected in several ways, including by the temporary closure of the department's Regional Service Centers and by the various closures and other service limitations at county tax offices. These fluctuations in service availability are outlined in this report.

Background

On March 13, 2020, Governor Greg Abbott declared a state of disaster in all Texas counties in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Pursuant to Section 418.016, Government Code, the disaster declaration provided that "any regulatory statute prescribing the procedures for conduct of state business or any order or rule of a state agency that would in any way prevent, hinder, or delay necessary action in coping with this disaster shall be suspended upon written approval of the Office of the Governor."

The following statutory and regulatory requirements were suspended to cope with the disaster.

Suspension of Certain Motor Carrier Requirements

Effective March 13, 2020, requirements for motor carriers to obtain temporary registration permits or apportioned registration and to obtain an oversize or overweight permit were suspended if the carrier is transporting supplies, medical equipment, and similar materials necessary for preparing for, responding to, and mitigating the spread of COVID-19.

As of the date of this report, these suspensions remain in effect.

Suspension of Certain Motor Vehicle Registration and Title and Parking Placard Requirements

Effective March 16, 2020, requirements to obtain the following were waived:

- Initial vehicle registration
- Vehicle registration renewal
- 30-day temporary permit renewal
- Vehicle title transfer
- Permanent disabled parking placard renewal

The purpose of these waivers is to provide relief to Texans and prevent customers from needing to physically visit a county tax assessor-collector's office to conduct in-person transactions. The waivers remain in effect until 60 days after TxDMV notifies the public that normal services have resumed. Customers may continue to renew their vehicle registration online at www.TxDmv.gov or www.Texas.gov.

As of the date of this report, these waivers remain in effect.

Title Transactions

The department has seen a decline in the overall number of title applications submitted during the pandemic. This is likely due in part to the waiver of the requirement to timely transfer title. The number of title applications submitted has been rebounding in recent months.

Registration Transactions

Although the requirement to renew motor vehicle registrations has been waived, many Texans have continued to register their vehicles. While the cumulative number of registrations remains down year-over-year, the department is processing increasingly higher numbers of registrations in each successive month since March 2020. For example, in April 2020, only 28.4% of registrations were renewed on-time, as compared to 48.1% in April 2019. In August 2020, the on-time renewal gap narrowed to only 5.3%, with 46.8% renewing on-time.

Online Registration Renewals

The department has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of Texans renewing their registration online at www.TxDMV.gov or www.Texas.gov. For example, in June 2020 the department processed more than double the number of online registration renewals than it did in February 2020. The number of registration renewals the department is processing online has fallen from its June record, but remains higher than normal.

Typically, to be eligible for online registration renewal, the registration must not be expired for more than six months. An upcoming release of the department's Registration and Title System (RTS) will extend the six-month period to nine months.

Vehicle Inspections

Although TxDMV does not oversee the vehicle inspection program, the department has received incidental reports of inspection station closures and some confusion regarding whether the vehicle inspection requirement has been waived.

It is important to note that although the requirement to obtain initial registration or registration renewal is currently waived, the vehicle inspection requirement has **not** been waived. For Texans wanting to obtain initial registration or registration renewal during the waiver period, a passing vehicle inspection report is still required.

The vehicle inspection program is overseen by the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Continuity of Services

Tax Assessor-Collector Offices

Most in-person motor vehicle title and registration transactions take place at county tax assessor-collector offices (TACs). The decision to close or otherwise limit service at TACs during the COVID-19 pandemic is made on the local level in each of Texas' 254 counties. Some counties opted to temporarily close their TACs entirely, while others opted to limit capacity or provide services via phone, email, and mail only.

Out-of-County Transactions

In response to multiple TAC closures, RTS was updated to identify transactions processed outside of an applicant's county of residence to make sure funds were handled appropriately. Texans may title and register their vehicles at a TAC outside their county of residence. TxDMV provided training to assist TACs with this feature in RTS.

This change does not affect online registration renewals, which may be processed at www.TxDMV.gov or www.Texas.gov.

Department Website

Throughout the course of the pandemic, the TxDMV website is frequently updated with contact information and the current operational status of the TACs in each of Texas' 254 counties. Texans may visit www.TxDmv.gov/COVID-19 for additional information and updates on counties' TAC operations.

TxDmv Operations

Transition to Remote Workforce

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the TxDMV workforce reported to work onsite at the department's Austin headquarters or in one of 16 Regional Service Centers (RSCs). Beginning the week of March 16, 2020, the department began transitioning as many employees as possible to remote work (telecommuting).

Approximately 75% of the TxDMV workforce continues to telecommute successfully, with the remaining staff reporting to work at the department's Austin headquarters or to provide in-person services to customers at RSCs.

New Employees

The department continues to recruit and hire new employees as necessary to ensure Texans' continued access to quality services. New hires are recruited, onboarded, and trained remotely.

The department has approved the hiring of 12 temporary, part-time Customer Service Representative through an employment agency to assist with peak customer calling times in the department's Consumer Relations Division. If the pandemic-level volumes continue as expected, these temporary Customer Service Representatives will work through June 2021. If needed, the temporary employees may continue to work through August 2021 in the Vehicle Titles and Registration Division to assist with customer workload.

Virtual Meetings

On March 16, 2020, Governor Abbott suspended certain portions of the Texas Open Meetings Act to allow state agencies to hold public meetings virtually, provided certain public accessibility requirements were met. Beginning with the TxDMV Board meeting on April 2, 2020, the department has held all public meetings virtually while ensuring public access. This includes TxDMV Board subcommittee meetings and department advisory committee meetings. As of the date of this report, the department continues to hold public meetings virtually.

Virtual Training Seminars

TxDmv training for motor vehicle dealers and motor carriers has traditionally been offered in person only. Over the course of the pandemic, the department has adapted its training to be offered online.

Regional Service Centers

On March 17, 2020, TxDMV closed its 16 RSCs to in-person transactions by the public in an effort reduce customers' exposure to COVID-19. TxDMV services and support continued to be available by mail, email, and phone. The department utilized this time to install plexiglass barriers between staff and customer areas and to acquire additional cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment for staff, including masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer.

By May 29, 2020, all regional service centers were re-opened to the public for in-person transactions by appointment only. The department is utilizing an online queueing system that allows customers to select services and schedule appointments in advance. Customers arriving for scheduled appointments wait in their vehicles rather than inside the RSC waiting area. Customers will receive a text message when it is their turn to enter the building for their appointment.

Customer Interaction

The department has been responding to a significant increase in customer call and email volume and social media interaction since March.

Phone Calls

The department has seen a marked increase in the number of phone calls received from customers since March 2012. In the six-month period immediately preceding the pandemic, the department received an average of 48,670 phone calls per month. In the six-month period since the pandemic began in March, the department received an average of 70,331 phone calls per month. The department received 80,133 phone calls in the month of July 2020. The table below illustrates the increase in call volume in Fiscal Year 2020.

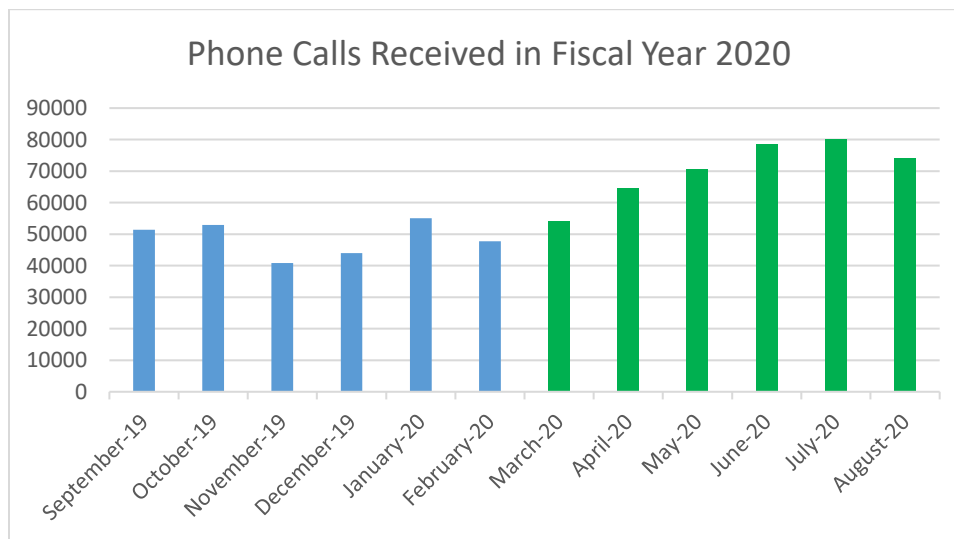


Chart 1. Customer Phone Calls Received in Fiscal Year 2020

Emails

In the six-month period preceding the pandemic, the department received an average of 5,220 customer emails per month. In the six-month period since the pandemic began in March, the department has received an average of 10,082 customer emails per month. The table below illustrates the increase in email volume in Fiscal Year 2020.

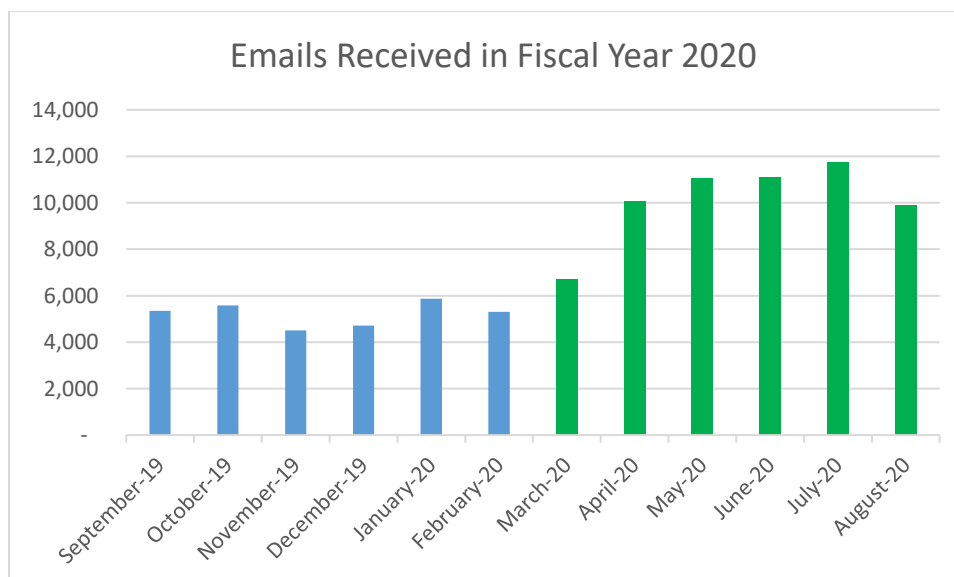


Chart 2. Customer Emails Received in Fiscal Year 2020

Social Media

The department's use of social media has played an important role in communicating with and providing guidance to the public throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a routine post on the department's Facebook page could ordinarily be expected to reach 4,000 people over the course of a month. A post on April 1, 2020, reached 379,692 people within the first 18 hours. By 36 hours, the post had reached more than one million people. Less than 48 hours later the post had reached nearly 1.3 million people.

The chart below demonstrates the rapid growth in the number of people following the department on Facebook since the pandemic began in March.

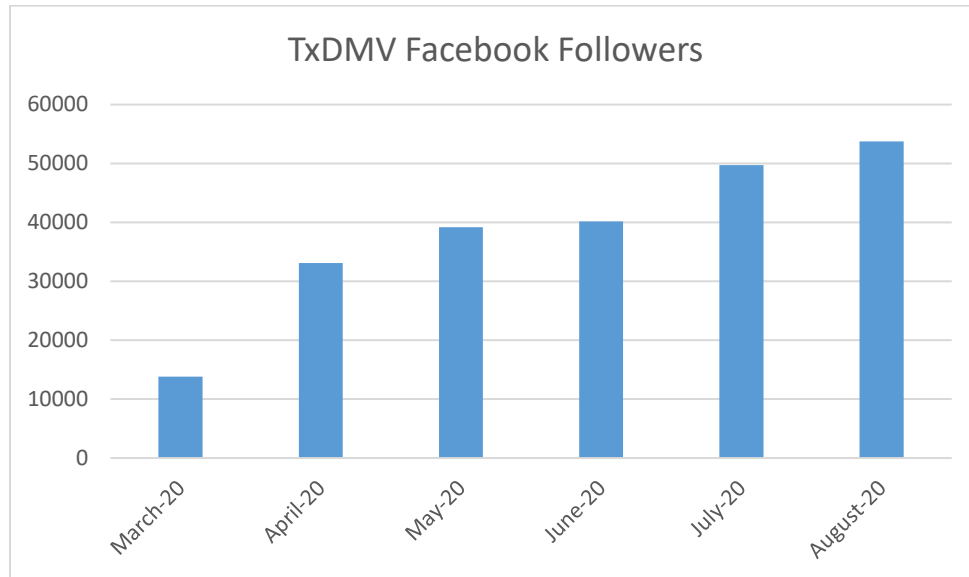


Chart 3. TxDMV Facebook Followers Growth